



A90 Policy, Ethics, and the Use of DNA in Migrant Families

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the ethical implications of the policies informing the use of DNA to: (1) screen for human trafficking; (2) reunify migrant children separated from their families; and (3) verify claimed biological relationships in migration.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by informing attendees on the utility and limitations of DNA testing of families in the context of migration at the United States-Mexico border.

United States border security protocols are turning to DNA as a biometric for processing refugee claims and to screen for human trafficking. Most migrants fleeing their home countries travel without proof of identity, so genetic information is useful for establishing identity and verifying biological relationships. The United States has had the authority to collect DNA from immigrant detainees for the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) since 2008, primarily to detect immigrants who commit crimes in the United States. Recently, the United States has expanded the uses of biological relationship testing to verify relationship claims in immigration. In 2018, the “zero-tolerance” policy to separate migrant children from the adults accompanying them led to subsequent offers of genetic testing for reunification and use of DNA testing for verifying biological relatives. These discussions sparked controversy in news and social media. Public debate continued into 2019, fueled by a rapid DNA program at the border to perform kinship analysis to verify migrant family claims.

As part of this research into how genomics is used in immigration contexts, this study evaluated how the use of DNA in a politically charged circumstance was covered by news and social media. Systematic searches of newspaper databases and Twitter® were conducted for coverage of DNA testing and migrants for the 2-month period of June and July 2018. For comparison, these search parameters were repeated in May 2019 to capture articles and tweets about the rapid DNA program. This study identified trends, including common topics and miscommunications, as well as significant gaps in discussion of DNA testing and topics covering the legal contexts and ethical implications of using DNA tests as a measure of family relationships. In both news articles and tweets, it was found that a politically conservative or pro-zero-tolerance policy slant strongly corresponded to a pro-DNA testing stance, while a liberal or anti-zero-tolerance policy slant corresponded diversely to pro-, anti-, and neutral stances on DNA testing.

Public discussion surrounding the use of DNA for documenting families demonstrates both the complexity of this application as well as key communication issues in the public sphere, including: (1) lack of transparency on the use of DNA tests (causing speculation); (2) ineffective inclusion of experts in public conversations (causing misinformation to spread); and (3) ill-preparedness of the scientific community to react to public confusion and outcry (causing scientific misunderstandings to go uncorrected). The expanded uses of genetic information beyond crime investigations could result in stigmatization of individuals or entire populations, if applied broadly. Moreover, the geneticization of families undermines the social constructs that underlie human relations and self-identity and could lead to discrimination of non-traditional families or revelations of unintentional family secrets that could endanger individuals.

DNA Testing, Immigration, Ethical Implications